

Who wants COVID-19 vaccination? In 5 West African countries, hesitancy is high, trust low

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 432 | Aminatou Seydou

Summary

Although Africa has so far been spared the massive COVID-19 death tolls experienced in some other regions, health officials are urgently advising African leaders to launch mass vaccination campaigns (France24, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021a) reports that countries are indeed “revving up” to roll out vaccines in the face of recent surges in coronavirus infections, including faster-spreading new variants.

The Africa CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention) estimates that at least 60% of the continent’s population needs to be vaccinated to create community immunity that will protect Africans – and by extension help protect the rest of the world as well (Anna, 2020). That’s an enormously complex and expensive undertaking, but less expensive and difficult than continuing or repeating the economic, educational, and social shutdowns that have helped protect the population until now (Lancet, 2020).

Africa has trailed other regions in receiving vaccines, but rollouts are gathering speed with shipments to a growing number of countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, South Africa, Angola, and Zimbabwe (Petesch, 2021; BBC News, 2021a; CNN, 2021; Kyobutungi, 2021; WHO, 2021b). The COVAX initiative for equitable global access to COVID-19 vaccines and the African Union are working to secure and deliver hundreds of millions of doses to the continent in coming months (WHO, 2021c; Jerving, 2021).

Among the multitude of challenges of vaccinating a population – from funding and fair access to the global vaccine market to the logistical difficulties of transporting, storing, and administering vaccines (Edward-Ekpu, 2021; DW, 2021) – not the least is vaccine hesitancy and resistance. Fueled by mistrust of the health-care system and political institutions, popular reluctance to be vaccinated is a growing problem worldwide; in 2019 – before the COVID-19 pandemic – the WHO (2019) identified vaccine hesitancy as one of the top 10 global health threats.

A recent survey led by the Africa CDC (2020) found that four out of five respondents (79%) in 15 African countries said they would take a COVID-19 vaccine. The study blamed hesitancy on doubts about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines and misinformation about COVID-19, such as that it isn’t real, doesn’t pose a serious threat, or can be cured by safer alternative treatments. Another study in 19 countries around the globe, including South Africa and Nigeria, reported that about 72% said they would be likely to get vaccinated against COVID-19 (Lazarus et al., 2020).

But Afrobarometer’s nationally representative surveys in five West African countries (Benin, Liberia, Niger, Senegal, and Togo) offer less optimistic findings: On average, only four in 10 people say they would be likely to try to get vaccinated, including just one in three Liberians and one in five Senegalese. Most say they don’t trust their government to ensure that the vaccines are safe.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys were completed in 18 countries between August 2019 and March 2020 before fieldwork was suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Round 8 surveys started up again in October 2020 with a new question module on COVID-19.

This dispatch is based on data collected during the period October 2020-January 2021 in five West African countries: Benin, Liberia, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. In each country, Afrobarometer conducted face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult citizens that yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

Key findings

- In the five surveyed countries in West Africa, most citizens – 92% on average – say they are “somewhat well informed” or “very well informed” about the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to combat it.
- While about two in 100 respondents say they or a member of their household became ill with COVID-19, 14 times as many (28%) report that a household member lost a job, a business, or other primary source of income due to the pandemic.
- Only three in 10 respondents (31%) say they trust their government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure that any vaccine is safe before it is offered to citizens. Mistrust is particularly high in Senegal (83%) and Liberia (78%).
- Six in 10 citizens (60%), on average, say they are unlikely to try to get vaccinated, including 44% who consider it “highly unlikely.” Senegalese (79%) and Liberians (66%) are most likely to express a reluctance to take the vaccine.
- Vaccine hesitancy/resistance skyrockets alongside doubts about the government's ability to ensure that vaccines are safe. Those who fully trust their government on this score are five to 10 times as likely to want the vaccine as those who don't trust it.
- Large majorities in Niger (89%), Liberia (86%), and Senegal (71%) believe that prayer is more effective than a vaccine in preventing coronavirus infection. Views are more divided in Benin (41%) and Togo (40%).
- Poor respondents express a greater reluctance to get vaccinated than their better-off counterparts.
 - Except in Liberia, citizens with more formal education are not significantly more likely to want the vaccine than their less educated counterparts.
 - Vaccine hesitancy is significantly stronger in cities than in rural areas in Benin, Togo, and Niger.
- Looking ahead, only a small minority (20%) of citizens in these West African countries think that COVID-19 will be a serious problem for their country over the next six months. But unlike trust in the government, the expected severity of the pandemic does not appear to be a decisive factor in people's willingness to be vaccinated.

Awareness and experience of COVID-19

The five West African countries of Benin, Liberia, Niger, Senegal, and Togo have all recorded significant numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths (see Table 1), as well as painful restrictions on economic activities and schools. With 35,857 cases and 919 deaths, Senegal has been hit hardest.

Table 1: COVID-19 in 5 West African countries

Country (population, 2019)	Cases of COVID-19*	Deaths due to COVID-19*
Benin (11.8m)	6,071	75
Liberia (4.9m)	2,024	85
Niger (23.3m)	4,828	177
Senegal (16.3m)	35,857	919
Togo (8.1m)	7,570	92

*As of 8 March 2021, WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard (WHO, 2021d)

All five countries are eligible for vaccines under the COVAX initiative, but their approaches to vaccinations have varied. While the government in Benin has said it is taking a cautious wait-and-see attitude toward mass vaccination (Logo, 2021), Liberia has applied to procure COVID-19 vaccines (Wiakanty, 2021). Togo's minister of health announced in late January that the country was preparing to launch a vaccination campaign "during the coming weeks" (TogoFirst, 2021). In Niger, the government has committed 70 billion Franc CFA (about U.S. \$129 million) to a campaign to vaccinate the most vulnerable groups in the first half of 2021 (Seriba, 2021).

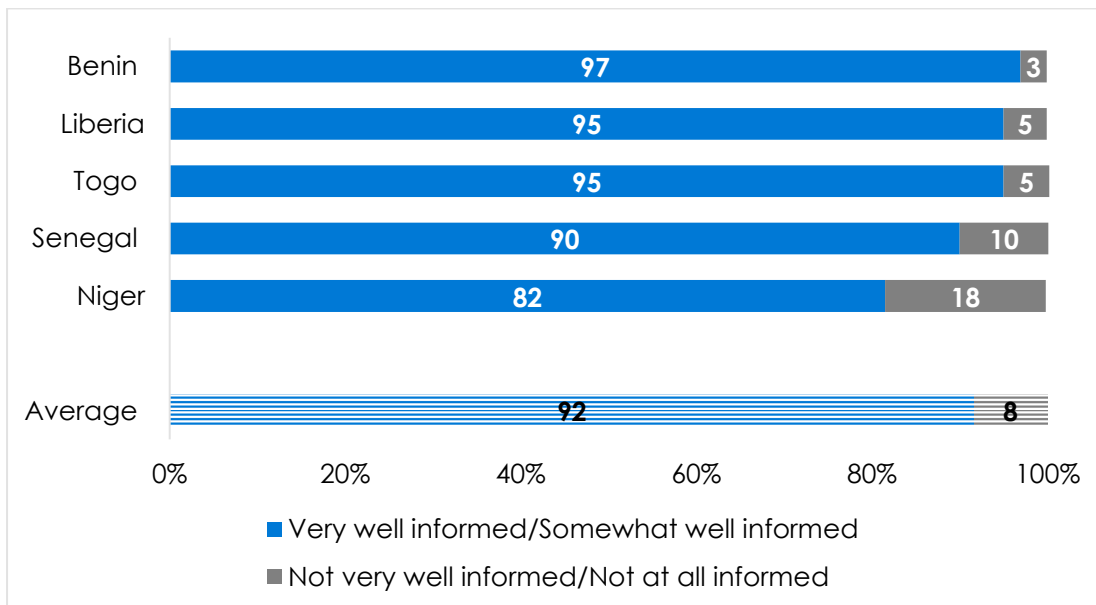
Senegal is the most advanced of the five, having recently received its first 200,000 doses, funded from its own budget and intended for health workers, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations. The government has announced that it is working to acquire 6 million doses (BBC News, 2021b).

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In all five countries, Afrobarometer surveys found that most citizens say they are "somewhat well informed" or "very well informed" about the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to combat it (Figure 1). At least nine out of 10 respondents claim basic knowledge about the coronavirus in every country except Niger (82%).

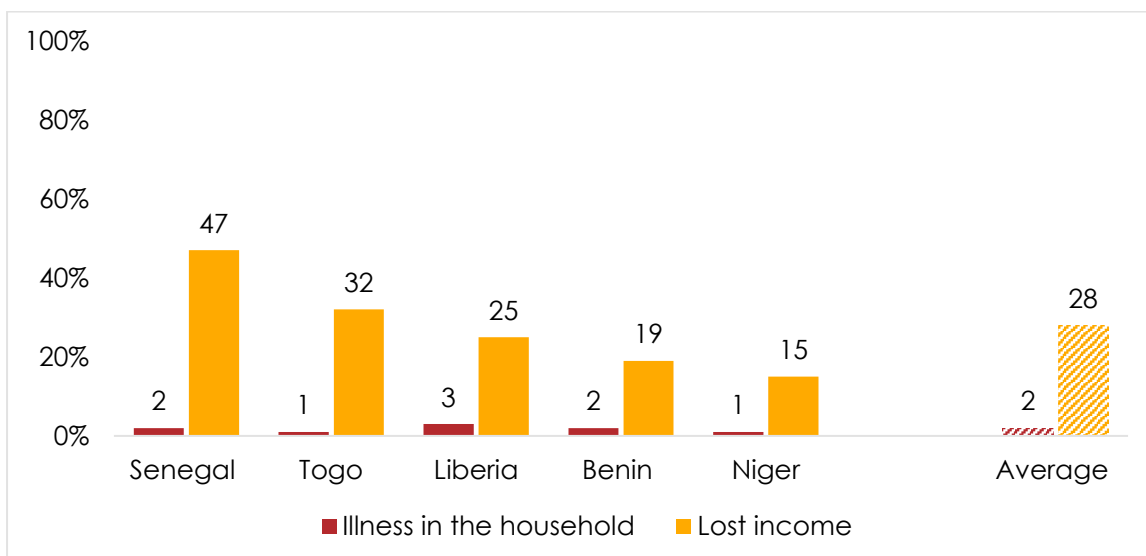
On average across the five countries, two in 100 citizens say a member of their household became ill with COVID-19, and almost three in 10 (28%) report that a household member lost a job, a business, or other primary source of income due to the pandemic. The economic impact of the pandemic was particularly strong in Senegal, where almost half (47%) of citizens report a loss of income – about three times as many as in Niger (15%) (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Awareness of COVID-19 | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it?

Figure 2: Impact of COVID-19 | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



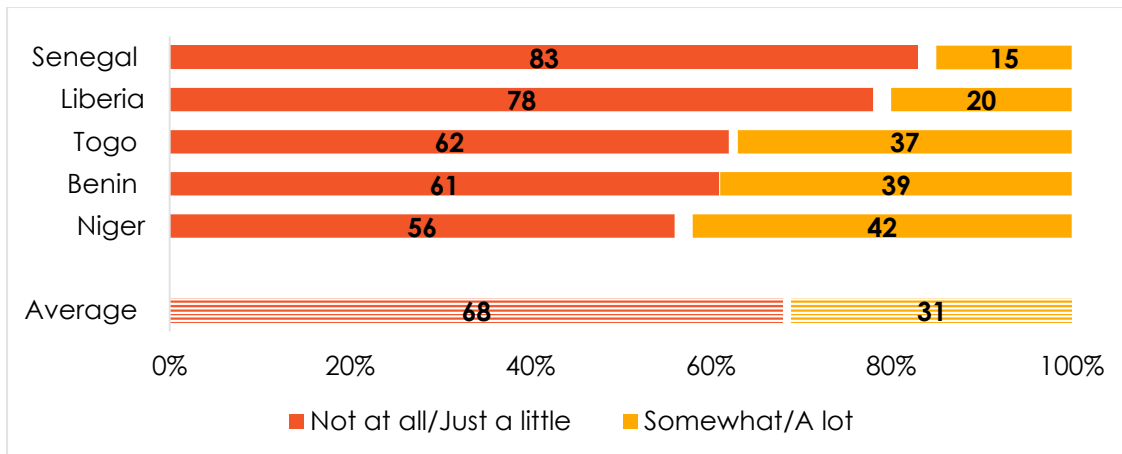
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income?

Views on vaccines

Skepticism about COVID-19 vaccines is high in these five West African countries. Only three in 10 respondents (31%) say they trust their government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure that any vaccine is safe before it is offered to citizens, while more than two-thirds (68%) express “just a little” or no such trust (Figure 3).

Mistrust is particularly high in Senegal (83%) and Liberia (78%), but is the majority view in the other three countries as well.

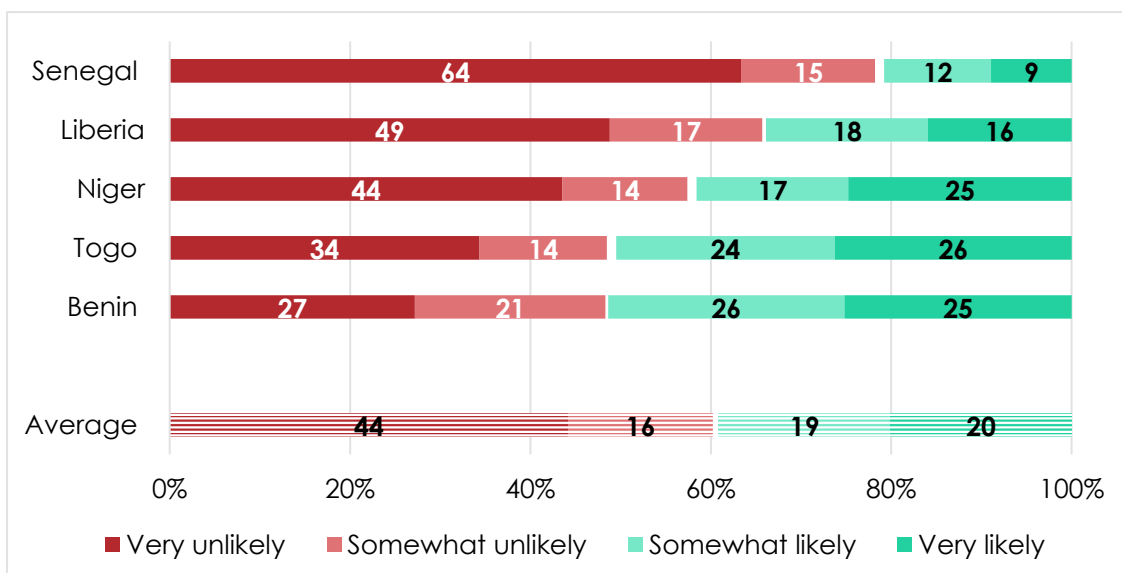
Figure 3: Trust government to ensure safety of COVID-19 vaccine | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

Similarly, by a 60% majority, these West Africans say they are unlikely to try to get vaccinated even when a vaccine that the government says is safe becomes available. Resistance (44% who say “very unlikely”) is considerably stronger than hesitancy (16% who say “somewhat unlikely”) (Figure 4). Citizens in Benin and Togo are evenly divided on whether they are likely to get vaccinated or not, but vaccine hesitancy/resistance exceeds three-fourths of the population in Senegal (79%).

Figure 4: Likelihood of trying to get the COVID-19 vaccine | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



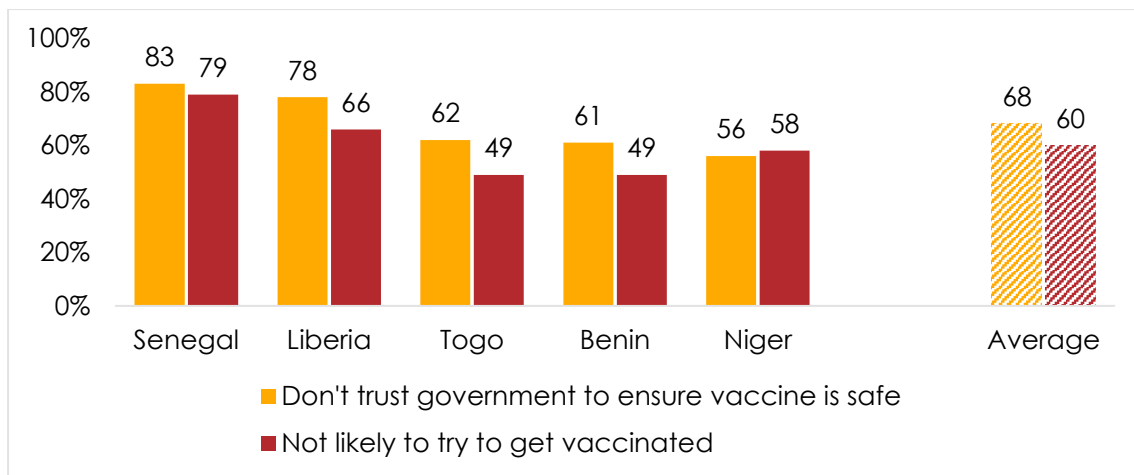
Respondents were asked: If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?

As Figure 5 illustrates, vaccine hesitancy is highest in countries with the least faith in the government’s ability to ensure that the vaccine is safe – Senegal and Liberia.

But the connection between trust and willingness to be vaccinated becomes even clearer when we directly compare trust levels and vaccine willingness (Figure 6). Among those who don't trust the government "at all" to ensure vaccine safety, on average only 13% say they are "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to try to be vaccinated, compared to 84% of those who trust the government "a lot" – a gap of 71 percentage points.

In every surveyed country, the most trusting respondents are about five to 10 times as likely to say they will probably get vaccinated as the least trusting.

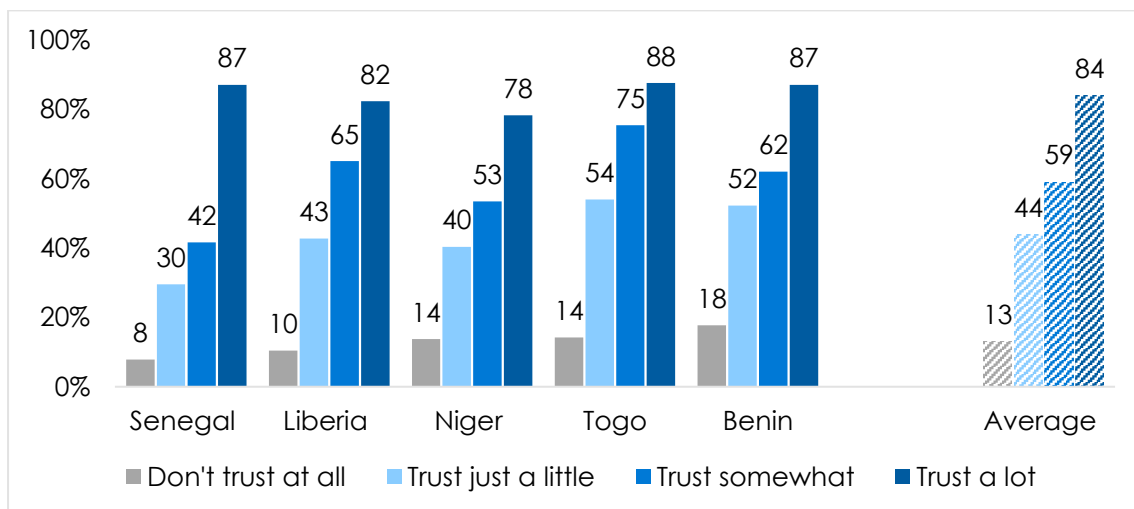
Figure 5: Don't trust government, unlikely to get covid-19 vaccine | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked:

How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for covid-19 that is developed or offered citizens is safe before it is used in this country? (% who say "not at all" or "just a little")
 If a vaccine for covid-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "not very likely" or "not at all likely")

Figure 6: Likelihood of getting vaccinated, by level of trust in government to ensure vaccine safety | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



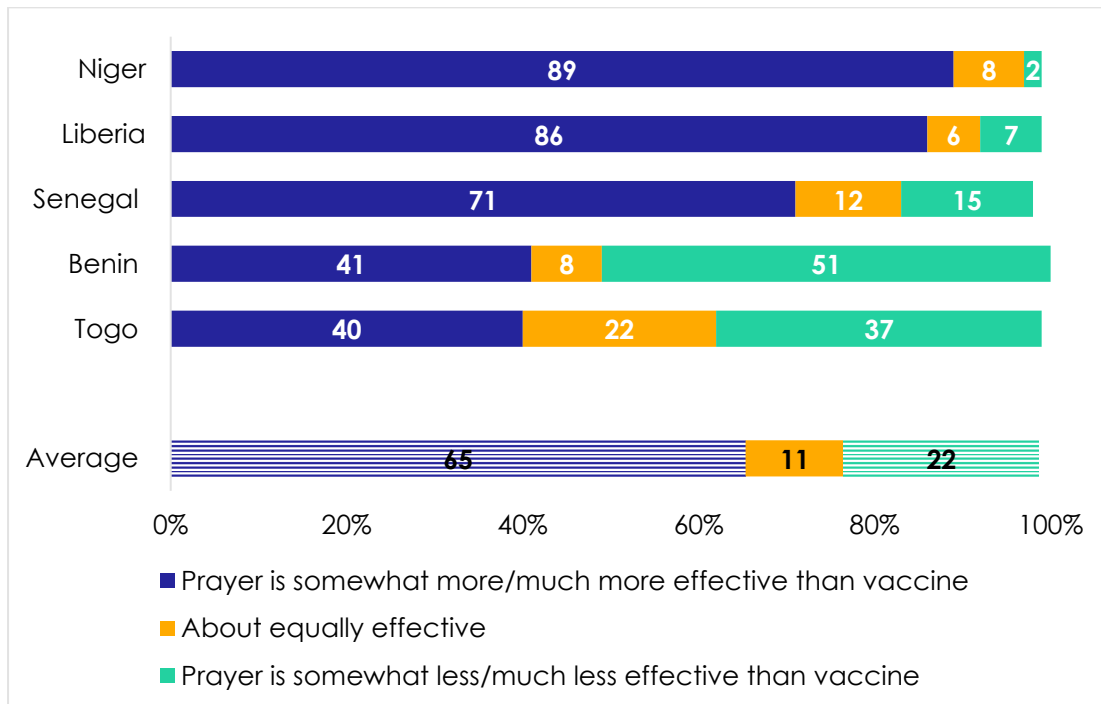
Respondents were asked:

How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for covid-19 that is developed or offered citizens is safe before it is used in this country?
 If a vaccine for covid-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

In three of the surveyed countries, people are far more likely to believe in prayer than in vaccines as effective in preventing coronavirus infection. This view is nearly universal in Niger (89%) and Liberia (86%), and very strong in Senegal (71%) (Figure 7).

Togolese are about evenly divided on this question, while Benin is the only country where a majority (51%) consider vaccines more effective than prayer. As we saw in Figure 4, these two countries also register the lowest levels of vaccine hesitancy/resistance.

Figure 7: Prayer vs. vaccine: Which is more effective against COVID-19?
 | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked: Some people think that prayer is an effective way to alter events in the world. Others put more faith in science to solve problems. Some people believe in both. What about you? Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection?

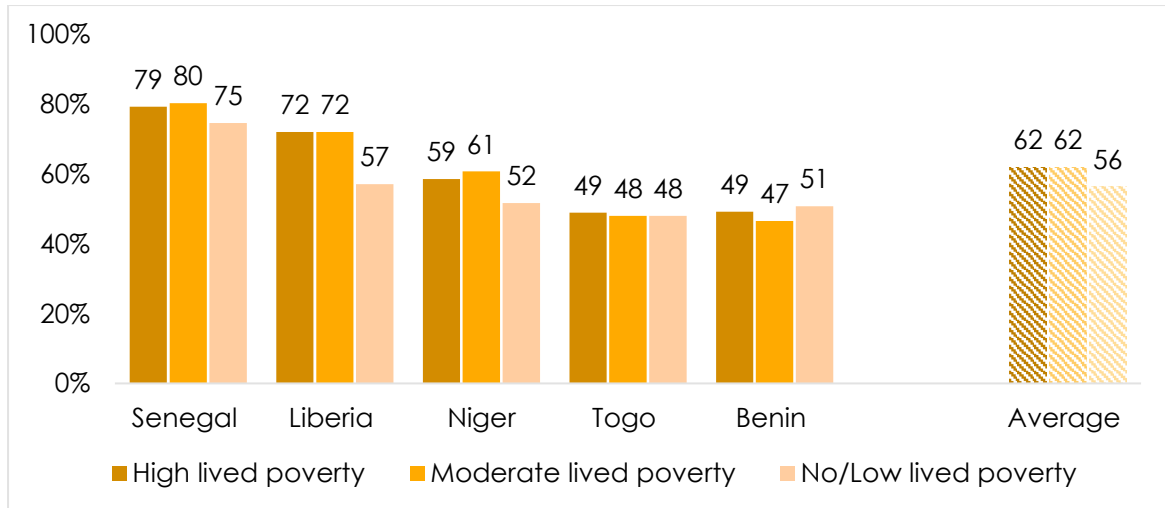
Vaccine hesitancy by demographic group

When it comes to vaccine hesitancy/resistance, differences by respondents' demographic characteristics pale in comparison to differences by levels of trust in the government. But they may provide some useful pointers for targeting efforts to promote vaccination.

In Senegal, Liberia, and Niger, poor people¹ express a greater reluctance to get vaccinated than their better-off counterparts, while Togo and Benin show no such pattern. On average across the five countries, a gap of 6 percentage points separates respondents with high or moderate lived poverty (62% who say they are somewhat/very unlikely to try to get vaccinated) from those with low or no lived poverty (56%). In Liberia, the gap is 15 points (Figure 8).

¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Figure 8: Unlikely to try to get vaccinated | by lived poverty level | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021

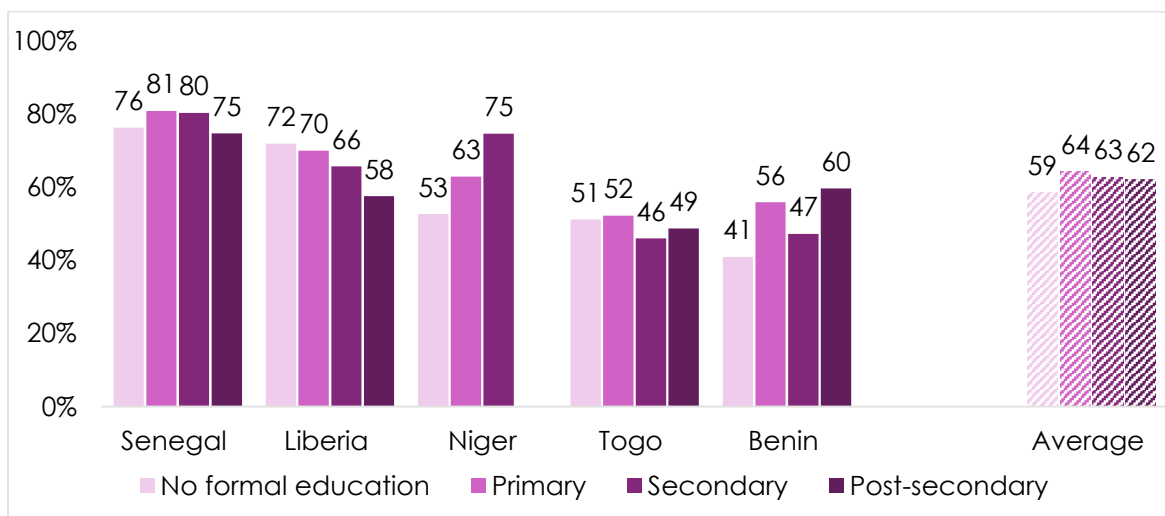


Respondents were asked: *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely”)*

While men and women differ little in their likelihood of wanting to get the vaccine, people with no formal schooling are, on average, slightly less likely to resist vaccination (59%) than their more educated counterparts (62%-64%) (Figure 9). But this pattern is strong only in Niger, where hesitancy/resistance increases from 53% among those without formal education to 75% among those with at least secondary schooling, and may reflect the fact that trust in the government’s ability to ensure vaccine safety declines as education level rises.

In Liberia, the opposite pattern prevails, with hesitancy/resistance declining from 72% to 58% as the education level rises.

Figure 9: Unlikely to try to get vaccinated | by education level | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021

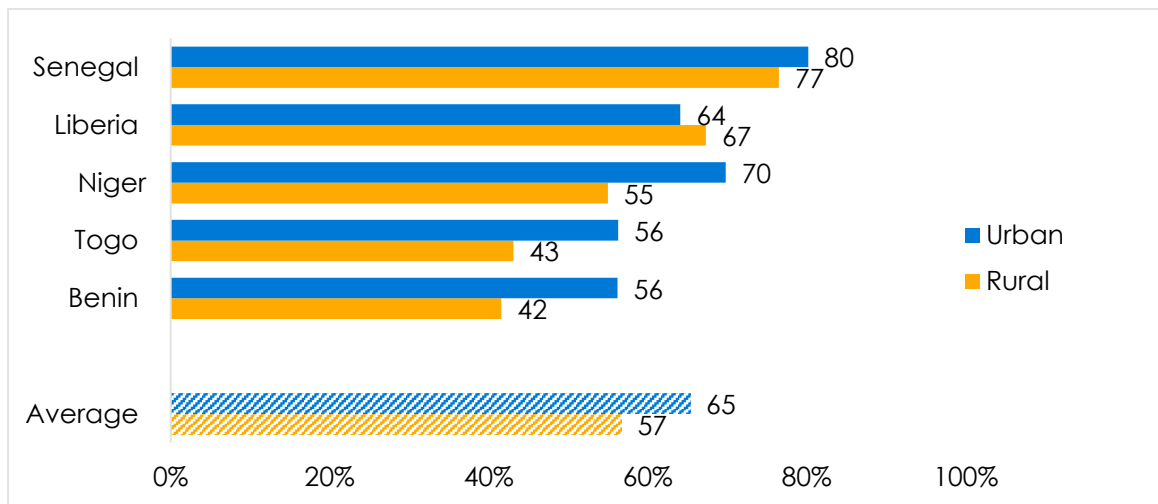


Respondents were asked: *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely”)*

Note: For Niger, “secondary” and “post-secondary” categories are combined into “secondary” due to small sample sizes.

Mistrust may also be at play in the finding that vaccine hesitancy/resistance is 13-15 percentage points higher in cities than in rural areas in Benin, Togo, and Niger (Figure 10) – the three countries where trust in the government’s ability to ensure vaccine safety is significantly lower in the cities.

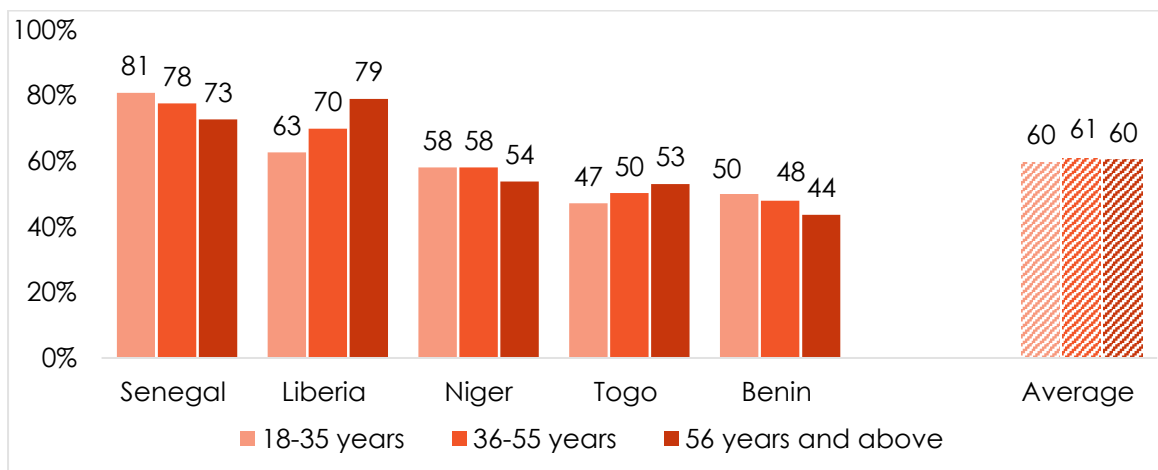
Figure 10: Unlikely to try to get vaccinated | urban vs. rural | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked: *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely”)*

Finally, the reluctance to be vaccinated against COVID-19 shows different age-cohort patterns by country, decreasing with age in Senegal, Niger, and Benin but increasing with age in Liberia and Togo (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Unlikely to try to get vaccinated | by age | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked: *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely”)*

Looking ahead

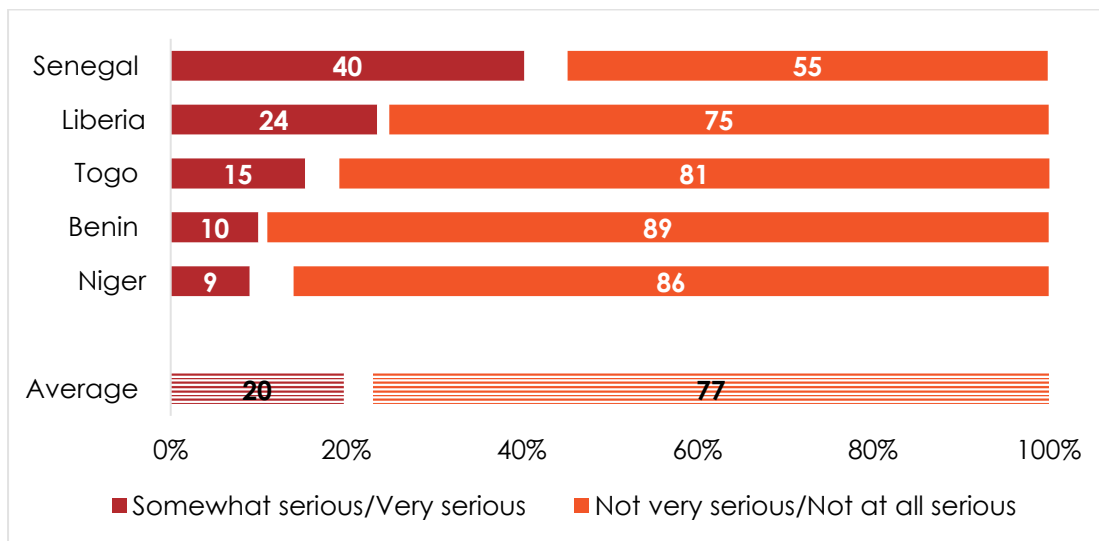
Looking ahead, only a small minority (20%) of citizens in these West African countries think that COVID-19 will be a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem for their country over

the next six months (Figure 12). Only one in 10 Nigeriens (9%) and Beninese (10%) consider the pandemic a major threat.

Notably, concern is highest in Senegal (40%), where citizens are least trusting of the government to ensure a safe vaccine and least likely to want to get vaccinated.

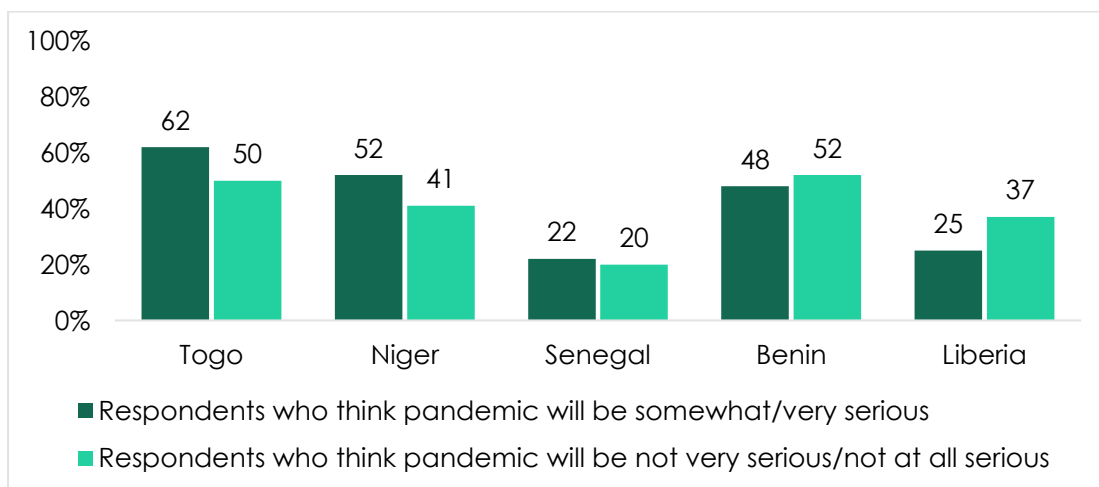
But these preliminary findings don't suggest a clear relationship between people's level of concern about the pandemic and their willingness to be vaccinated. In Togo and Niger, we find what we might expect – that people who think the pandemic is likely to be a serious problem are more likely to be willingness to be vaccinated. But in Benin and Liberia, we find the opposite (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Future impacts of COVID-19 | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked: Looking ahead, how serious of a problem do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will be for your country over the next six months?

Figure 13: Likely to try to get vaccinated, by views on seriousness of pandemic | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked:

Looking ahead, how serious of a problem do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will be for your country over the next six months?

If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

Conclusion

New Afrobarometer survey findings from five West African countries show a high level of awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic, but a high level of skepticism about COVID-19 vaccines as well. Majorities in Senegal, Liberia, and Niger say they are unlikely to try to get vaccinated, and half of citizens in Benin and Togo say the same.

Preliminary analysis shows that this vaccine hesitancy/resistance is powerfully related to doubts about the government's ability to ensure that any vaccine is safe before it is offered to citizens. In each of the surveyed countries, people who fully trust the government on this score are between five and 10 times as likely to want the vaccine as those with no such trust. This trust deficit – the majority position in every country – represents a significant challenge for vaccination campaigns.

Confidence is considerably stronger in the power of prayer to prevent coronavirus infection. Believers might also look to religious leaders – consistently identified in Afrobarometer surveys as the most trusted public figures (Howard, 2020) – who could be powerful allies for African governments and others focused on promoting COVID-19 vaccination.

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